

From Resentment to Gratitude: How the bioregional movement changed me

*From the unpublished memoirs of Barbara Harmony
Edited by Sasha Daucus*

My life has been very rich because it has been so intertwined with the Water and bioregionalism. Recognizing my part in the Water cycle, thanking the Water and being present to the Water have made changes in my consciousness, ones that I believe must occur for us to share Water and use it wisely. Water is living, and it wants to be known.

My journey with Water began when I first came to Eureka Springs, Arkansas, in 1974, and drank from Little Eureka Spring and Onyx Spring. I felt the healing qualities of the Water and I loved being able to fill jugs as it came out of the rocks.

In 1978 my son Ben was born, and a year later I began my journey as an eco-defender of water. I met two women who were concerned about the construction of a sewage treatment plant downstream from Eureka Springs, a scenic area that was a habitat for wildlife and had one of the largest hand-cut stone dams in the world, Lake Leatherwood Dam.

It occurred to me that it might be possible to stop the construction of the sewer plant on the basis of historic preservation for the impressive dam, which looked like a Mayan Ruin. I was looking for a cause--I always liked trying to make things better and enjoyed the excitement of organizing.

Through the EPA, I learned that sewer plants could not be built in a flood plain. A longtime resident, Elnora Camp, realized immediately that the plant was in a flood plain, and produced old newspaper photos of the area completely flooded to prove it, so we were able to stop the construction of the plant below Lake Leatherwood Dam.

However, we still needed to resolve the local sewage problem. A committee called Concerned Citizens was formed to look for a solution. Over the next year, our pursuit of an ecologically sound solution inspired us to take action on a level that many of us had never attempted before.

The city was able to get funding for a comprehensive hydrology study that assessed the problem from many different angles, including a door-to-door survey of all area residents; and testing and dye-tracing at the springs. Many innovative ideas were suggested. A local meditation teacher and engineer became an impor-



Photo by Becky Gillette

Barbara Harmony in 2012

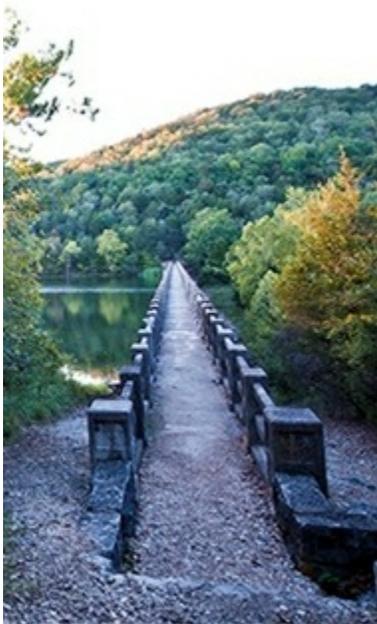


Photo by Steven Foster

Lake Leatherwood Dam

tant influence in the work. The Concerned Citizens became a service project of his meditation group.

In that group, I was exposed to an interesting idea that has taken me a long time to accept -- that our thoughts and feelings have an influence on the Water. At that time, the idea that my anger influenced the Water just made me angrier!

Since the focus of our work had shifted from downstream neighbors to Eureka Springs, the group changed its name from Concerned Citizens to Concerned Citizens National Water Center, and then to the National Water Center, since we were at the center of the nation. We were aware of the irony of having a bioregional group with "national" in the name. Several times we tried to drop the "National" and be The Water Center, but national always stuck.

The National Water Center, www.nationalWatercenter.org became a central part of my life work. Our motto was Heal the Waters. My hope was that Eureka Springs might become a model for healing of Healing Waters.

In time, the National Water Center published a book on composting toilets, *We All Live Downstream: a guide to waste treatment that stops water pollution*. It was one of the few books on compost toilets available worldwide, and is now available online in pdf format from <http://patcostner.net/2012/05/29/we-all-live-downstream/>.

After its publication, I gave presentations around the country about compost toilets and the importance of keeping waste out of Water, explaining that if people were not toilet trained to Water they would not accept using it as a waste vehicle. In the process of these travels, I discovered that there were people who understood immediately that having a compost toilet was a major part of the life cycle and important to living in harmony with nature; and that what was a pollutant in the Water was a nutrient on the land.

While we were actively looking for a solution to the sewage disposal problem, friends from Eureka Springs connected with a place called New Life Farm in the town of Brixey, in southern Missouri. New Life Farm consisted of a group of people living together experimenting with alternative energy systems. Among other things, they were experimenting with methane and solar energy, and investigating attached solar green houses.

Through them, we met Ella Alford and Stuart Leiderman who were involved in the *Why Flush* project that was advocating compost toilets after the collapse of the West Plains, Missouri, sewage lagoon.

Stuart and Ella encouraged our interest in compost toilets as appropriate on-site systems. The door-to-door survey of Eureka Springs residents had shown that three hundred out of the thousand Eureka Springs Water customers were willing to try a compost toilet. The EPA would pay 75% of an innovative system. We recommended a major demonstration



Photo by Penny Carroll

Barbara at Lake Leatherwood

project of three hundred onsite composting toilet systems as a way to stop the sewage leakage which was currently contaminating the springs; and as a way to allow for their recovery.

We ran into difficulties getting this idea accepted by the state health department. Even with the new Mayor and City Council who had been elected largely on the basis of the idea of renovating the current sewage system, we were not able to get agreement for compost toilets.

I felt that area residents could overcome the health department's hesitation if there was a strong public will to do so. We came up with an idea to create a community-wide event that would be both educational and fun: National Water Week!

The first was held in September 1980. At the request of our committee, the then-governor of Arkansas, Bill Clinton, signed a proclamation creating National Water Week. For seven years we held seven Water Weeks that had water related activities each day for seven days.

The activities included canoe floats, pontoon boat rides, Water Works art shows and Water Music in the park. Over three hundred people participated in putting on each Water Week. This was nearly a third of the population. One year, there was a compost toilet building workshop. We created t-shirts, bumper sticker, note cards, and posters to sell. Eureka Springs' musicians created a tape of eight original Water songs to sell. Yet, with all this effort, it still did not seem we were getting closer to having clean springs.

During the same period of time when we were beginning to take action on behalf of the springs, David Haenke, who was part of the New Life Farm Community, corresponded with a number of people interested in ecology and invited them to the first ever Bioregional Community Congress. The congress, called the Ozark Area Community Congress, more commonly known as OACC (pronounced "oak"), was to be held in October 1979.

It was to be a gathering of the growing number of people who were recognizing that in order to secure the clean air, Water and food that we need to healthfully survive, we had to become guardians of the places where we live.

Because I had just put on the first National Water Week in Eureka Springs in September of that year, I did not attend that first OACC, but I did get involved. Before the next one, I attended two meetings of Mother OACC.

Mother OACC was a feminist group that grew out of the initial OACC. We were a group of strong women, aware of how often in organizations women were in the background as lovely assistants. We determined that in this new movement women would have an equal role. I think that in this period of time I was still generally angry.

In October 1980, I attended OACC for the first time. There was a lot of excitement about the Congress, and we talked of the Ozarks seceding from the USA.

Part of the work of the Congress was making resolutions about various issues to give a framework for a new sustainable society based on place. I, with some others, worked hard on Water resolutions, particularly the importance of compost toilets.

The Congresses have been held annually since then. Over the 33 years since OACC began, I attended many of them and was a part of the organizing committee for all that were held in Arkansas.

Inspired by the Ozark Area Congress, folks from New Life Farm had taken on the huge task of organizing a continental congress to be held in 1984, called the North American Bioregional Congress (NABC). The first was held in Excelsior Springs, Missouri. I attended and in addition to water issues, I focused on women getting enough speaking time.

Sonja Johnson, a brilliant feminist speaker who was running for president on the Citizen Party ticket was able to attend the first NABC. I worked hard to get an opportunity for Sonja to speak in a plenary session. Because she was taking part in a national election and that was not a bioregional concept, it was challenging to get her a place on the agenda for the first or second day, and she would only be staying a limited amount of time. Sonja did get a chance to speak.

Fiber artist Connie Grand was commissioned to make a beautiful quilt of Turtle Island. The pieced quilt was at that first NABC. This inspired me to suggest that everyone would have to do some quilting before having a chance to speak, feeling that this would give a handicap to the men and even things up for the women.

Men lined up to quilt. The steering committee was concerned that this would slow the meeting down in the plenary session. They asked if I could agree to alternate men/women speaking. This established a pattern for many future Congresses.

Both local congresses like OACC and the continental congresses came to include alternate men/women speaking. Many of them were set up with similar elements: Plenary Sessions, Clans, Morning Circles, Volunteering, Facilitators' Circle, Workday, Men's and Women's Circles, Cultural Sharing Nights, Committees, Workshops (planned in advance as well as generated on the spot by congress participants). Lasting for a week, the congresses were ceremonial villages.

It was so satisfying to be with so many like-minded people, eating delicious fresh vegetarian meals, and walking rather than driving a car for an entire week. Even though I was aware of so many environmental catastrophes and apocalyptic scenarios, being with people from all over the continent who thought the way that I did was very reassuring. It made me feel that there was a greater order and a reason for hope.

I also loved the synchronicities I experienced at the Congresses. They kept me enthusiastic about attending, in spite of my growing discouragement about the progress on Water issues and my feeling that our talking wasn't getting us where we needed to go.

I began to notice synchronicities during the second Congress. I noticed that if I wanted to see a particular person out of 200 people over a large amount of space, I would see them within minutes. Other unusual things began to happen as well. For instance, at the second Congress, when the Kansas Area Watershed Council (KAW) presented a lightning rain song for part of their evening performance, a great lightning and thunder storm appeared out of nowhere. We were told that it doesn't usually lightning in that area of British Columbia!

I worked hard at helping to form a Water Committee at the first continental congress in 1984. At all the congresses after that, an active Water Committee met, with water workers from across the continent. Part of the work of the Congress was making resolutions about various issues. Together we created Water resolutions, particularly about the importance of compost toilets. I was amazed and delighted that there was general support for composting toilets.

We tried to present Water issues in a dramatic way. At the first congress, we held a Water ceremony in the dining hall, inviting people to pour Water into large kitchen bowls and remember Water from their bioregion by saying its name.

When we gave our presentation in the plenary, we asked the entire group to stand up. We then asked questions about Water conservation practices and people would sit down if they were not using Water wisely. We were delighted with the good Water practices of so

many bioregionalists. So many were left standing even when we asked the final question about compost toilet use. I was amazed and delighted.

As congresses came and went, however, and I saw that in spite of all our resolutions and talking not much was changing, I felt such despair about the lack of progress on Water issues that it became hard for me to participate in the discussions.

When in 1990, at the fourth continental congress, the Water Committee agreed to give thanks to the Water instead of organizing around Water calamities and disasters, I was relieved and thankful. Once we had made the decision to shift from the negative to the positive, it was amazing to see how events involving the Water Committee evolved. Synchronicities around Water began to increase for us in the Water Committee.

For our report to the plenary session, we decided to simply share smudging with a special sweetgrass. The morning that the plenary was to open that year, the Water Committee met on the bank of Lake Cobboseecontee. In the background we could hear angry tones of the group who had gathered early to set the agenda. They were discussing when to present the idea of going to Kennebunkport for a protest demonstration against the Bush administration. As the Water Committee drew together in our circle to give thanks to the Water, the agitated tones receded in the background.

There in the circle, we smudged ourselves with the traditional herbs. I felt the closeness of a sweat lodge in our circle even though we were out in the open. We opened our circle to step out into the Water and give thanks.

The circle had formed for the plenary session, and the tension continued. We walked up to join the circle bringing with us the purity and strength of purpose that we had received from the Water. We were first on the agenda and had been allocated exactly one hour.

The drummers marched in procession to the circle, sounding the drums and waving flags. Three members of our committee with indigenous North American heritage stepped into the circle and began to smudge each person with the sweetgrass, going around the circle of 150 people. We all stood in silence. I felt the Water returning our thanks one hundred-fold.

Exactly an hour later, everyone was smudged. The entire mood had changed and the plenary continued with the flowing Spirit of the Water as a part of the proceedings.

After that year, I looked forward to meetings of the Water Committee with eager anticipation. We felt like old friends of the Water. As we each told our stories, we felt her soothing presence. Once, a light misting rain fell which lasted for three minutes, exactly the amount of time allotted for each of us to speak.

Another year, in a large Women's Circle of about 80 women sharing from the heart when many women were crying, it rained indoors. I had heard of this before, but never experienced it until then. We felt so close to one another and the water.

Through these experiences of synchronicities and giving thanks, my focus shifted. As an eco-defender, I always felt the need to fight to protect the environment.

Bored with all the talk that seemed to lead nowhere, I realized that out-dated ways of conducting meetings seemed hopeless to me. Finding common ground, consensus building, and staying out of an adversarial frame of mind was very important to me, but the kind of meetings we were having that included long diatribes in plenary sessions, especially from men, were more than I could take. It was a very different story when people spoke from their hearts. The competitive group process is not conducive to that kind of openness or for the free flow needed to inspire creative thoughts.

I have come to believe that the solution lies more in modeling a bioregional life style that includes growing food and trees and keeping waste out of Water. It is a big step to realize the difference between living a simple green life compared to being part of the consumer life-style.

I do walk the talk. For the last thirty years I have lived in a 600 square foot passive solar house, have a bucket compost toilet, collect rainwater off the roof in a cistern, eat locally grown food as often as possible, am vegetarian and support my neighborhood and community.

To preserve a local forest, I have worked with my neighbors particularly with Mary Jane Fritch, who owned the land, to put 168 acres into the Ozark Regional Land Trust (OR-LT) so it will be protected into the future, after we are gone.

Although in recent years, I don't see my land trust neighbors as often as I would like, I am happy to know that they are nearby. We get together for special annual celebrations.

Mary Jane at 99 is an inspiration us. When many locals did not think much of "hippies" Mary Jane related to us and worked out arrangements so we could manage to buy or build houses on her land. Well into her 80's, she took care of old people who were younger than she. Her knowledge of the plants, the land and nature is extensive. She loves to have the opportunity to be in the woods. Since she no longer drives, she calls on neighbors and friends for rides to the grocery store, laundromat and other activities.

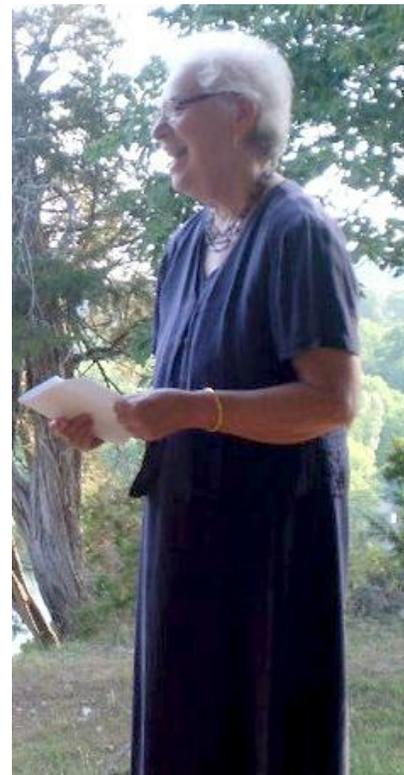
At a continental congress in Mexico fifteen years ago, I was included in a group of elders. People at the congress gave us a great deal of respect. At that time I was 55 years old and didn't really think

of myself as an elder, yet having that experience has been very helpful to me. It was a wonderful contrast to the isolation that people may feel growing older in the consuming culture. In comparison, a different attitude made me feel included and appreciated.

Now, I have a simple routine to my life. I live in my small energy-efficient house. I stay involved with Water issues as coordinator Spring Committee. My main focus continues to be the Springs, their health and healing and my own.

Through my home business, Harmony Astrology and Weddings, I do readings and perform simple weddings. With friends, I exercise several times a week. Monthly, I participate in the Wild Women writing group and the Harrington book club. Weekly, I eat out with a group of friends.

Every Monday for 13 years, Sally Sterkle has come to help me with the yard. We walk around and decide what needs to be done for the day. I have a chance to build on what Mary Jane started when she lived in this house that she and her husband Clarence built in 1951. Living in the house until 1978, she planted many flowers. In late January, snow drops are the first flowers to appear. Later, in February,



Barbara performing a vow renewal in 2011

Photo by Piper Allen

about 200 crocus bloom, having spread from the six that Mary Jane originally planted. As the spring progresses, I am delighted by the grape hyacinth, daffodils, bleeding heart, naked ladies, lilac, tiger lilies, and in late summer spider lilies and crepe myrtle. I am proud to say that starts from my forsythia are in yards and gardens all over the county.

In autumn, I watch a maple turn a gorgeously peachy red.

This is the bioregional way of aging!



Photo by Becky Gillette

Barbara in 2011

This article was written in conjunction with a panel discussion entitled 'OACC Originals' held during OACC 33, on October 6, 2012 at the Ananda Kanan Ozark Retreat Center in Willow Springs, Missouri. The panel discussion covered the history, impact and vision for the future of OACC. Copies of the panel discussion may be available by contacting Sasha Daucus through the OACC facebook page at www.facebook.com/OACCCleaf.